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**Regional scenario**

In the backdrop of the continuing US pull-out from Afghanistan, the stalled talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and the Taliban regaining control over 81 percent of the country through enhanced military offensives, Prime Minister Imran Khan has expressed his views very candidly about the emerging regional scenario in an interview with Axios on HBO, through his article published in the Washington Post and via an interaction with two senior editors of The New York Times.

The points he emphasized were: Pakistan is ready to be a partner for peace in Afghanistan with the US as the two countries want a political settlement, stability, economic development and denial of any haven for terrorists in the war-ravaged country. He further feels that the US should not pull out before a political settlement in Afghanistan as that could re-plunge the country into factional fighting with implications for the entire region; the US announcement about withdrawal has weakened Pakistan’s clout; Pakistan will not provide any bases to the US in the post-withdrawal period; Pakistan has learnt from its past mistake of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan and in future will not take sides; Pakistan is opposed to any military take-over of Afghanistan, which will lead only to decades of civil war. He also lamented the apathy of the world towards the people of Kashmir who are suffering under Indian occupation for well over seven decades, a factor which is also a threat to peace and security in the region.

The prime minister’s assessment about the unfolding events is simply incontestable. If the US pulls out as per an announced schedule without a political settlement, the country is sure to witness more factional fighting with disastrous consequences for Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries, more so Pakistan which has the highest stakes in peace in that country. Things are already pointing in that direction with the Taliban securing more and more territory and determined to impose an Islamic system of governance in the country, which means that they would probably go for a military victory. That may not happen as perceived by them consigning the country to an unending conflict.

Pakistan has paid a very heavy price for involvement in the ‘war against terror’, losing more than 70,000 people and sustaining a loss of $150 billion while it received only $20 billion from the US. That is why it has been making strenuous efforts at the bilateral and multilateral forums to end the conflict and bring a political settlement to the country. The role played by Pakistan in helping the Taliban conclude a peace deal and then making the Taliban agree on intra-Afghan dialogue has been acknowledged globally. That effort would go down the drain if the US completed its withdrawal without a political settlement in Afghanistan.

The prime minister is right on the money to contend that Pakistan cannot afford continued conflict in Afghanistan and to give bases to the US, something that could have serious repercussions for Pakistan as it would increase terrorist attacks in Pakistan in retaliation by the Taliban and other terrorist outfits. Though Pakistan has exercised its influence on the Taliban to a negotiated settlement, US withdrawal without it has surely diluted Pakistan’s clout, which is not an encouraging development.

If the Taliban have remained adamant on sticking to their stated position, the Afghan government has also failed to show any flexibility that could have prevented the stalemate and paved the way for a consensus on the future political arrangement in the country. Regional countries including Pakistan are still continuing their efforts to promote an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. The dilemma, however, is that while the global community has appreciated the efforts made by Pakistan to resolve the Afghan conflict, the Afghan government continues to express its mistrust about Pakistan – notwithstanding several interactions between the civilian and military leaderships of the two countries in which Pakistan has repeatedly assured the Afghan government that it has no favourites in that country.

However, the US has greater responsibility to exercise pressure on the Afghan government in this regard. Currently, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the head of the High National Council for Reconciliation are in the US and have met President Biden who has assured them of continued economic and military support which – read between the lines – means that the US will continue to support the Afghan government in any ensuing confrontation between it and the Taliban in the post-withdrawal period. That would be a dreadful scenario. A political solution has to come before the US completes the pull out.

Unfortunately, besides the Afghan government trying to thwart the prospects of peace in Afghanistan thrown open by a peace deal between the Taliban and the US, India is also playing a significant role in scuttling those efforts. If the US really wants peace in Afghanistan, it also has to restrain India from playing a spoiling role.

The region not only faces threat to peace and security because of the situation in Afghanistan but also due to India’s illegal actions in Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. As pointed out by Prime Minister Imran Khan, the West and the US must pay heed to the genocide of the Kashmiris and end their plight by pressurizing India to fulfill its obligations as enshrined in the UNSC resolutions.

The hegemonic designs of the Indian government, inebriated by the RSS philosophy of ‘Hindutva’ and its forceful occupation of Occupied Kashmir, are a real threat to regional peace and could have serious consequences for the region as well as the strategic interests of US and its allies, if it leads to a military confrontation between the two nuclear powers. Kashmir is admittedly a nuclear flashpoint and the solution of this dispute needs urgent attention of the UN and the global powers including the US.

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